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Navalny's Bid to Reform Utilities Sector Headed for Rejection

By Oleg Sukhov

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Two commissions of the Moscow City Duma on Tuesday recommended against registering opposition leader Alexei Navalny's bid to submit a bill on utilities prices, which he has sought to make the first-ever grassroots initiative considered by legislative authorities in Russia.

Navalny wrote on Twitter that the City Duma would hold a formal vote on whether to register the initiative Wednesday. "Formally, the vote will be held tomorrow but the outcome is quite clear," he said. "The Moscow City Duma will do everything to protect monopolies in the housing and utilities sector."

So far, not a single bill initiated directly by citizens has been considered by either the federal parliament or regional legislatures. But Navalny has launched a campaign, called the People's Deputy, to collect signatures for several bills, taking advantage of President Vladimir Putin's promise to consider bills submitted by citizens on the federal level and a Moscow law that gives groups of citizens the right of legislative initiative.

Navalny has said his bills would let him deliver on promises he made before the Sept. 8 mayoral election, in which he was the runner-up.

The utilities legislation initiated by Navalny would require mandatory audits of utilities prices, which are regulated by the government, by independent companies in an effort to reduce unjustified costs.

The City Duma's commissions on housing policy and legislation, which held a joint meeting on the utilities bill, said that it contradicted federal law, according to Navalny, who attended the meeting. City Duma Deputy Andrei Klychkov of the Communist Party supported the bill, while all other commission members were against it, Navalny said.

Navalny's spokeswoman Anna Veduta, and Lyubov Sobol, a key promoter of the utilities bill, were prevented from attending the meeting "practically by force," Veduta wrote on Twitter.

"This is a representative body of Muscovites but they fear two girls like fire," she said. "They are very amusing."

Navalny set up a special group of citizens for the utilities bill in early October. Under city law, a group of citizens that has collected 50,000 signatures for a bill has the right of legislative initiative.

Navalny said the law made it very difficult to register a group and introduce bills. Signatures can be collected only by members of a specific group of citizens within a month.

He said earlier this month that the group had "complied with the most idiotic requirements of the law" to avoid giving the City Duma an excuse for not registering it and that the meeting was "unprecedentedly open" for all media. Navalny added that this was the largest and "the most law-abiding" group ever set up for a legislative initiative.

Political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said that despite Navalny's promise to comply with all legal requirements, his legislative initiatives had no prospects whatsoever.

"Federal authorities will do their best to block these initiatives in order to avoid making him more popular," Belkovsky said.

Navalny uses the initiatives not actually to implement them but to mobilize his supporters, Belkovsky said.

In August, Navlany said he would also seek to submit another five bills to the city legislature. These would prohibit municipal agencies and companies from hiring migrants; make public all information on repairs, land improvements and waste disposal, as well as all decisions made by the city government; and introduce elections of justices of the peace.

Navalny has also used the Russian Public Initiative, a website launched after Putin promised in February 2012 to consider all legislative initiatives that collect at least 100,000 signatures.

Earlier this month, Navalny launched an effort to collect 100,000 signatures for a bill that would introduce visas with Central Asian and Caucasus countries in response to an anti-migrant riot in the Biryulyovo neighborhood in southern Moscow.

In April, Navalny also spearheaded an initiative to collect signatures for a bill seeking to prohibit officials from buying vehicles worth more than 1.5 million rubles ($46,875). The required number of signatures was collected, but in September the initiative was rejected by the Cabinet.

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